

COMMON GROUND: SYNTHESIZING AGRICULTURAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL POLICIES

Can the agricultural and environmental communities agree on much? “Much more than each side realizes,” says an enthusiastic Steve Shaffer, who heads the California Department of Food and Agriculture’s new Office of Agriculture and Environmental Stewardship. In its short existence, Shaffer’s office has become instrumental in assisting both communities, plus other stakeholders, find common ground to achieve lasting agreements and policy solutions.

The office also provides accurate and timely information, ensuring a solid scientific basis for government actions. Says Shaffer: “Whether it’s a new regulation, or it’s regulatory relief, or it’s an incentive program, whatever the action, there needs to be a scientific foundation. Within this office, we now have an excellent technical and scientific group allowing us to engage the agricultural community, regulatory agencies and environmental groups on a technical level. This is making it possible for the department to improve the state’s scientific foundation for regulatory actions.”



The Office of Pesticide Consultation and Analysis works collaboratively with the Agricultural and Environmental Stewardship group. It has become the department’s eyes and ears on all state and federal pesticide regulatory issues. To accomplish this mission, the office provides economic analysis of proposed pesticide regulatory actions, working closely with the California Department of Pesticide Regulation, U.S. Department of Agriculture, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, and the University of California. Pictured from left to right: John Steggall, Senior Environmental Scientist; Dave Luscher, Senior Agricultural Biologist; Lisa Serrano, Office Technician; Charles Goodman, Senior Research Manager; and Barbara Todd, Senior Research Program Specialist.



The Office of Agriculture and Environmental Stewardship helps to ensure a solid scientific basis for regulatory actions. Pictured from left to right: Matt Summers, Air Resources Engineer; Casey Walsh Cady, Environmental Scientist; Steve Shaffer, Director; Carmen Mello, Management Services Technician; Ken Trott, Staff Environmental Scientist; Al Vargas, Staff Environmental Scientist; George Bluhm, Air Resources Engineer; and Matt Reeve, Staff Environmental Scientist. Not pictured is Gerry Miller, Senior Environmental Planner.

Shaffer observes: “This is a whole new scientific and technical exchange that’s been generated. Our goal is to encourage reasonableness in regulations. This will, in turn, help to build confidence on the part of the agricultural community in terms of the regulatory process.”

The Agriculture and Environmental Stewardship office not only advises and communicates, but also implements sound public policy. In its short existence, the office has assembled an impressive record of accomplishments.

New Uses for an Old Agricultural Byproduct

The Rice Straw Utilization Tax Credit Program provides \$400,000 per year in tax credits (at a rate of \$15 per ton of rice straw utilized) to those who make environmentally sound use of rice straw. The popular program has been used mainly by dairy operations that use straw as bedding material in barns. The state Air Resources Board, the environmental community and the American Lung Association support the program. Shaffer says that these entities “recognize that California farmers have done their

part in reducing rice straw burning, and they need some help in terms of moving the rice straw off their fields in an economically viable manner.”

There is also the Rice Straw Utilization Grants Program. This program has been funded at \$2 million, with grants allocated at a rate of \$20 per ton of rice straw utilized. Eligible rice straw uses include cattle feed, composting and erosion control. It is estimated that the tax credit and grants programs account for 70 percent of rice straw being utilized in the state.

Finding Lasting Solutions

In the CALFED Bay-Delta Program, which is designed to address the state’s critical water needs, the Agriculture and Environmental Stewardship office is the lead agency staff for CALFED’s Working Landscapes Subcommittee. The subcommittee is an outgrowth of the department’s success in getting CALFED to recognize that actions such as ecosystem restoration may impact agriculture. To this end, the subcommittee, which brings together state, federal and local agencies, plus agricultural and environmental organizations, seeks to create partnerships to meet ecosystem restoration goals and, more broadly, create beneficial outcomes for agriculture and the environment.

An important issue for the west side of the San Joaquin Valley, the Tulare Basin and Imperial Valley is the need to carefully manage irrigation drainage water to maintain productivity of the land and protect the environment. In looking for an innovative approach to this problem, the office spearheaded a coordinated effort of farmers, state agencies and environmental groups. Their efforts resulted in streamlined water quality regulations — through Senate Bill 1372 (Machado) — that will reduce grower costs while improving on-farm water use efficiency and protecting wildlife and water quality.

California is the nation’s largest producer of dairy products. To protect streams and groundwater from inadvertent pollution, the office is actively involved in the California Dairy Quality Assurance Program. This effort brings together government agencies and the dairy industry to address food safety, animal welfare and environmental stewardship in milk production. Staff helped develop and implement a program of producer education, self-assessment, and independent evaluation that has resulted in 105 producer evaluations and 80 producers achieving certification.

The agricultural sector has come under increasing attention to help improve air quality. As cities continue to spread into the rural landscape, there is increased pressure on all industries to reduce air emissions. This can have a significant impact on agriculture. In order to assess this impact, from both the scientific and economic perspectives, the office’s research has found that air emission estimates from agricultural sources are often based on outdated studies. Some previous estimates of emissions from dairies, for instance, could be overstated by a factor of 3 to 10.

*“Thank you for your efforts
on behalf of a sustainable
and healthy future for California
agriculture and its environment.”*

Ben Wallace, Conservation Associate
California Wilderness Coalition

Further, the office was a key part of the department’s push to develop information to assist with passage of the agricultural provisions of SB 5X. The bill creates incentives to purchase high efficiency agricultural equipment, retrofit equipment to burn alternative fuels, purchase advanced metering equipment, replace inefficient agricultural pumps, and develop bio-gas digestion power production on dairies and other facilities. So far, 10 dairies have been approved to install anaerobic digesters for their on-site power needs, turning waste product into 1815 kilowatts of renewable energy. This is enough energy to light nearly 2,000 homes.

Summing up his unit’s vision, Steve Shaffer says: “Agriculture is not just food, feed and fiber. Agriculture helps society by providing open space, wildlife habitat, flood protection and much more.”

Agriculture is getting smarter in its environmental practices because farmers “want to sustain this resource for future generations.” Importantly, Shaffer notes: “This is the same perspective that the environmental community has. Agriculture needs good air and water quality to be productive. There are commonalities, but they have different cultures.” By bringing those two cultures together, the Agriculture and Environmental Stewardship office is helping to guarantee a cleaner and more prosperous future for all Californians.